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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001366

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TAGS: PHUM PREL KDEM KCRM BG

SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN CROWLEY, PM ZIA DISCUSS ELECTIONS,  
CORRUPTION, EXTREMISM AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

REF: DHAKA 932

Classified By: CDA Judith Chammas; reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Congressman Joseph Crowley thanked PM Khaleda Zia on February 22 for her government's recent steps to protect religious minorities, praised steps to control extremism and stressed the importance of free, fair and transparent elections. He encouraged a stronger response to corruption. PM Zia said her government supports religious tolerance and wants free, fair and transparent elections. She criticized the opposition for failing to follow parliamentary procedures in submitting their election reform proposals. She said her government had brought the extremists under control and would remain vigilant against further extremist violence. PM Zia blamed the press for creating a perception of pervasive corruption. End summary.

¶2. (U) Congressman Crowley, accompanied by the CDA Judith Chammas and econ off (note taker), met with PM Zia for 30 minutes on February 22 at the Office of the Prime Minister.

¶3. (C) Congressman Crowley described his meetings with representatives of the Hindu, Ahmadiyya, and Christian communities (reftel) and conveyed the appreciation of the Ahmadiyyas for government actions to prevent recent attacks on them. He also conveyed the Archbishop's positive comments on his relationship with the government. He encouraged the government to continue to speak publicly against attacks on religious minorities while protecting them against future threats. PM Zia said her government supports religious tolerance, citing her remarks at a recent conference to promote interfaith dialogue.

¶4. (C) Congressman Crowley stressed U.S. interest in elections that were both perceived to be and were in fact free, fair and transparent. PM Zia said her government also wants free, fair and transparent elections, expressing confidence that her government would win in a fair election. CDA supported the decision of both parties to place the opposition's election reform proposals before Parliament. PM Zia cut in, complaining that the opposition had failed to properly submit their proposals, insisting that proper procedure be followed before the proposals could be discussed. CDA urged the government to show flexibility to allow debate on the proposals.

¶5. (C) On combating extremism, Congressman Crowley praised Bangladesh efforts, including its actions against Jamaat

Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) and the PM's support for establishing dedicated counter-terrorism bureaus within the intelligence services. PM Zia said the government worked closely with imams throughout the country to denounce violence in the name of Islam. As a result, she said, JMB has no support in the villages and is on the run. She also instructed the central bank to work with banks to trace and cut off the flow of funds to JMB. "We have almost crushed JMB," she asserted confidently. While acknowledging the government's success, Congressman Crowley encouraged Bangladesh not to let up in its fight against the JMB and extremism generally.

¶ 16. (C) Congressman Crowley urged concrete steps to address corruption, noting Bangladesh had received the worst ranking for five consecutive years on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. He pointed out that a non-transparent government procurement process discourages U.S. and other foreign investors from doing business in Bangladesh. He cited pressure to retender a police radio procurement that Motorola believed it had won as an example of how mishandling of even small government tenders can contribute to the broader perception that Bangladesh suffers from serious corruption.

¶ 17. (C) Bangladesh has proven that it can address difficult issues when it wants to, Congressman Crowley said, citing Bangladesh's successful actions to combat child labor and trafficking in persons. Congressman Crowley warned that U.S. assistance to Bangladesh may be reduced because of U.S. budget realities. Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) funds could help offset reductions in other areas; however, Bangladesh's failure to act against corruption was a major

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impediment to Bangladesh's request for MCA funds. The government needed to demonstrate the kind of commitment against corruption that it showed in combating child labor and trafficking of women and children if it wanted to qualify for MCA funds. He urged the government to get the anti-corruption commission functioning effectively.

¶ 18. (C) PM Zia responded by criticizing the Transparency International ranking, saying it was based on "bogus" and irresponsible press reports. If Bangladesh is so corrupt, why does the economy perform so well, she asked rhetorically? PM Zia expressed concern over possible cutbacks in U.S. assistance. Reducing aid will encourage those most needing help to turn to the fundamentalists for support, she said.

¶ 19. (U) Congressman Crowley departed before this message was drafted.

CHAMMAS